Where’re you headed?” our cabbie asked Harry, who then glanced at me. Annoyed, I shook my head. Even though Harry was two months shy of his eighteenth birthday, cab drivers in Las Vegas continued to direct their questions to him, not me. It was the same in restaurants, where waiters set the check down in front of Harry. I felt like I was traveling with Rusty Griswold, Chevy Chase’s underage son from the ’90s flick Vegas Vacation, who rode around town with an entourage of older women and who casino staff believed was high-roller wunderkind Mr. Papagiorgio. But this was 2008. Could these men really think a teenager was my escort?

“We’re going to Lucky Cheng’s Restaurant,” I said.

Our driver hesitated. “So you’re in the mood for a little Chinese food, huh?”

“No,” I replied. “It’s a dinner-theater drag show.”

“Oh, I know that,” he said, looking at me in the rearview mirror.
“Just wanted to make sure you did. Some people go expecting egg rolls and chow mein.”

I had no idea what the drag club would be like, but I wasn’t the clueless middle-aged tourist our driver thought I was. I was excited to see the show Harry had chosen for the night and felt flattered he was bringing me into his world of drag performance. I’d told him in November that I wanted to take him to Las Vegas over Martin Luther King Jr. weekend as an early birthday present. My plan was to wow him with Cirque du Soleil’s aquatic show O, the new musical Beatles LOVE, and a pyrotechnic version of Phantom of the Opera, which he’d never seen. I’d figured that if we went to the Sunday matinee of LOVE, we could squeeze in something else that night. I wanted to let Harry pick the fourth show and rattled off a list of other entertainment options to him over the phone one night when he was at Ken’s.

“You know, Mom, I’d kind of like to see a drag show.”

My eyes blinked in rapid succession. “A drag show?”

“Yeah, I’ve never been to one.”

Of course Harry would be eager to see professional drag queens in action. The Rocky Horror Picture Show was still his favorite extracurricular. He had joined the local cast as soon as he was legally able to, shoving a parental permission form in front of me the day after his sixteenth birthday. Now, almost two years later, he performed the role of Trixie, the sassy hostess that entertained Rocky fans waiting in line outside. His elaborate wardrobe and extensive wig collection transformed him semimonthly from high school senior to flamboyant caricatures of Marie Antoinette or Jessica Rabbit. He never wore the same look twice.
“I haven’t seen a drag show either, honey, so why not? I’m searching Google right now.”
“Awesome, Mom, thanks.”
“Let’s see. The Flamingo headlines female impersonators. There’s a Cher, Madonna, Tina Turner, Liza Minelli, and other celebrities. A Joan Rivers hosts. The Flamingo’s a hotel, so that’ll be a big floor show.”
“Is that the only one?”
“There’s a Lucky Cheng’s Restaurant I’ve never heard of,” I said clicking to the site. “It says, ‘Drag performers sing live, lip-sync and dance throughout the dining room . . . audience participation . . . irreverent sense of humor—’”
“Definitely that one, Mom!”
“They do have a Sunday night show, so consider us booked.”

The cab dropped us off in front of a darkened venue. There was no sign and the place looked closed. We stepped into a dim entryway. Three sets of stackable dining chairs stood to our right next to two fake wood laminate tables, one inverted on top of the other. Some sound equipment and cords were shoved under a long table to the left. I was wondering if we were in the right place when a very attractive woman in a strapless silver-sequined dress pushed aside a black curtain.

“Welcome to Lucky Cheng’s,” she smiled. “I’m Asia.” Her voice was hoarse and deep; it was the only giveaway that she was a drag queen. She towered over me atop clear, Cinderella-slipper stilettos. I marveled at her supermodel-perfect hair and makeup.

“Follow me, please,” she said.

As Harry whispered that her dress was really two tube tops,
Asia stopped at the edge of the dining room. “Short bitch walking and her fag,” she yelled.

Everyone laughed. I felt all of my body heat rush to my face. Harry turned to look at me with a huge grin, signing with rapid head bobs that this was going to be fun.

During the preshow dinner, Asia picked up the bangle handle of my patchwork snakeskin wristlet. “Look at this!” she said to Bebe, another glam waitress and the current Miss Pride Las Vegas. “Cher here’s got a cock ring on her purse!”

Harry laughed while I managed a smirk, stiffening like an over-sprayed wig.

“Who made that thing, anyway?” Bebe asked. “Jeffrey Dahmer?”

Harry was having a blast. I felt like a prude. I knew if I were with my girlfriends I’d be lapping up the funny insults and references to huge dicks, too. But I was with my son. I wanted to maintain some parental decorum. I ordered a vodka martini straight up.

During the stage show, Harry and I tipped all the queens from the stack of singles we’d been encouraged to get from the bar in advance. Harry shared critiques of the performers with me between acts.

“She looks tired and bored,” Harry said of Miss Fortune, the emcee. “And she put no effort at all into her makeup.”

He was right. She didn’t look half as good as Harry did when he’d hosted the Miss Shorewood High Drag Pageant as Christina Draguliera the year before. His glittered eye makeup had resembled peacock feathers, and the sleek purple-sequined gown was an outfit I’d envisioned Marlene Dietrich wearing. I’d been apprehensive about him taking his tiara-topped femme fatale look to the high
school campus. Even though the pageant had been his brainchild as a fundraiser for the student council’s charity, the Shorewood High School auditorium at seven o’clock was a time warp away from the Oriental Theatre at midnight.

The drag pageant’s tonight and you haven’t rehearsed?” I’d asked nervously as he’d rushed down the stairs carrying a box overflowing with blond wigs, feather boas, and gold lamé. Before he had time to answer, I flashed on the audience. “What about the jocks and football players, honey? Have you thought about how they’re going to react?”

“Don’t worry, Mom,” Harry replied. “They’re in it.”

“They are?”

“Yeah, I recruited ’em. It’s for charity. And, besides, straight guys actually like dressing up in women’s clothes.”

While Flip Wilson and Benny Hill paraded through my mind, Harry brushed a kiss on my cheek.

“I gotta go, Ian’s waiting in the car. See you there?”

“Of course! I wouldn’t miss it, honey.”

Harry’s poster for the pageant, promising “real drag queens, real prizes, and lots of fake hair!” was taped to the exterior door of the auditorium when I arrived. The photo of him in full regalia spared no detail, right down to press-on nails. Inside the theater I did a double take; hundreds of people were already seated. In addition to students, I saw other parents, faculty, and administrators. I took an aisle seat in the center orchestra and then looked around. Ian’s mom sat a few rows up. She turned to wave and then gave me a thumbs-up. Fidgeting, I couldn’t believe Harry was going to wing
it in front of a packed house. A part of me stressed that Harry was going to shock people. This wasn’t some club in San Francisco; it was a suburban high school.

The audience applauded the moment my glitterati son walked out on stage, and the laughs began with his humorous welcome to a pageant unlike any other in Shorewood. The jocks in miniskirts tripping in their heels were hilarious. And everyone roared at Harry’s banter with the contestants, including his onstage questions for the finalists during the pageant interview. I clapped, too, realizing how silly I’d been to worry. Of course, people knew who Harry was. He was now just working the stage as an entertainer. He was as comfortable in the spotlight as he was in sequins, and the whole audience had jumped on his drag pageant train. I was proud of him for being himself, for having so much talent, and for putting on a show that raised nine hundred dollars for an orphanage in Guatemala. Harry was a superstar.

As I watched the low-energy Miss Fortune at Lucky Cheng’s, I thought Harry would have done a much better job as emcee. Just then she asked for audience volunteers to participate in a contest. Harry’s hand shot up, so I watched as he and five others took to the stage. They were to perform their best imitation of Meg Ryan’s fake orgasm from the movie, *When Harry Met Sally*. Audience applause would determine the winner.

I gulped as my heart moved up into my throat. I had to listen to my teenage son fake an orgasm? I’d never even said “orgasm” in front of him. But Harry was in his element: center stage. I knew my natural-born performer was going to give it his all. My lips curved to a frozen smile. I took a deep breath and imagined myself invisible.
Harry’s fake orgasm was one of the best, but I could not focus my senses fully on the applause meter. Sound echoed in my head. I was sure the metallic sensation in my mouth was the taste of extreme embarrassment. I sat with ankles crossed and clapped like a white-gloved monarch, three fingers of my left hand gently tapping the heel of my right hand.

“Hey!” Miss Fortune shouted, pointing at me. “You’re with him and you’re not even clapping!”

I felt my face turn the shade of the brick I’d just been hit with. I changed my applause on cue and even shouted a few woo-hoos.

Harry took second place. I thanked my lucky stars I didn’t have to watch him down the prize of a Slippery Nipple shooter.

“You did great, honey,” I told him when he returned to the table. “I almost fainted, but you were awesome.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Harry whispered. “I wasn’t sure, because I never saw that movie.”

*Oh my God, are you kidding me?* “Well, no one would have known that, I assure you.”

After the show I slid my credit card across the table to Harry. “Here, this is for Asia when she brings the check. I have to use the restroom.”

When I returned, most of the guests were milling around chatting. Harry stood a few feet from our table talking to Bebe. I saw her slip him a folded note. Was Miss Pride Las Vegas hitting on my son? I took my seat and Harry joined me.

“Here, Mom, you need to sign this,” he said, pushing over the plastic tray that held my credit card and a pen.

“What did Bebe have to say?” I asked, clicking the top of the ballpoint.
“Oh, we just exchanged email addresses,” he replied. “So, when Asia brought back your credit card, I told her it was my mother’s and that you would sign when you got back. Then the guy sitting behind me turned around, and said, ‘That’s your mother?’”

I forced a smile. Harry knew I liked hearing that someone didn’t believe I was his mother. But I still felt unnerved when it happened in Las Vegas.

“I said yes,” Harry continued. “And then he asked if you knew I was gay. I told him I came out when I was fourteen. He said I was lucky, because when he told his mom after college, the only thing she’d said was, ‘Do we have to tell anyone?’”

I looked at the man standing at his chair behind Harry, laughing with his group of friends. I wondered if his mother ever had accepted him for who he was, or if he tried not to think about that aspect of their relationship.

“That makes me sad and angry at the same time,” I said. “I want to hug that man and tell him I’ll be his mother.”

“Well, he’s right, Mom. I am lucky.”

“No, honey,” I smiled. “I’m the lucky one.”

I pushed away from the table, slipped my cock ring onto my wrist and put an arm around Harry. “Come on, honey. Let’s head back.”

“You know, Mom, I think I’m gonna go out for a while on my own.”

“Really? We have such an early flight tomorrow morning.”

“I know, but it’s really not that late. I’ve got my camera and feel like taking some pictures. All the lights here make it daylight even at night.”
I didn’t like the idea of Harry wondering around Sin City, but I couldn’t argue. He had proven in Madrid he could navigate a city where clubs stayed open all night. Plus, photography was his art, and Las Vegas was a jackpot of subject matter.

“All right, but please get back to the hotel at a decent time.” I said, rubbing his back. “Bubble of light, Harry, bubble of light.”

Harry nodded. I’d been telling him that before going out at night for the past four months. That’s how much time had passed since he’d been mugged two blocks from his dad’s house on his way home from a gender-bender party. His call had woken me at eleven o’clock on a Sunday night.

What do you mean gender-bender?” I’d asked, after learning he wasn’t harmed.

“You know, a mix-it-up party. My beard is half-shaved off.”

I switched on the light. “What happened?”

“I was on my bike when all of a sudden three teenagers rode up and forced me off the road. One of them pulled out a knife. He said he’d cut me if I didn’t give him my phone.”

I knew Harry was okay, but I still felt short of breath as I imagined him surrounded in the dark facing a weapon. “Oh, Harry, you must have been so scared. I hope you gave it to him.”

“I did.”

“Good!”

“Then he wanted my wallet, and I said I didn’t have any money.”

“You didn’t?”

“No, I did. My wallet was at the bottom of my backpack, but I wasn’t going to give it to him,” Harry said with belligerence.
“Jesus, Harry, you have to give up your wallet!”

“Then they wanted to know what was in my backpack. When I pulled out one of my red patent leather knee-high platforms, the guy said, ‘Hey, what are you? Are you a faggot? Wanna suck my dick, faggot? Wanna suck my dick?’”

A chill swept the back of my neck.

“I told them it was my girlfriend’s. Then a car turned the corner onto Kenilworth. That’s when he pushed me and my bike onto the street, and they sped off.”

“Oh my God, Harry,” I said, trembling. “Is your dad home? Did you call the police?”

“Dad’s out, but I talked to him, and he said to call the police. That was a couple of hours ago. They came here to fill out a report and then made me drive around with them looking for the guys. They just left. Can you get a copy of the phone records sent to the detective’s email?”

“Yes, of course. Are you sure you’re okay? Do you want me to come over there?”

“No, Mom, I’m fine. A few scrapes and a little shaken up is all.”

Ever since that happened I imagined Harry being safe in the universe, protected by a bubble of light, the same bubble that Glinda had traveled in.

As we walked out of Lucky Cheng’s, Harry adjusted his camera strap with the button “Eat! Fuck! Kill!” pinned on it. “Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll be fine.”

*Bubble of light.*
I had to face facts though. That protective bubble of light wasn’t going to keep me from becoming an empty nester in the fall. And while I was preparing psychologically for living alone while Harry was a thousand miles away, I didn’t want my world without him to define me. Rather than anticipate the loneliness of daily life without Harry, I was set on being open to positive change and other possibilities.

I reached for the book I’d brought from home and set on the nightstand, *The Nature of Personality Reality: Specific, Practical Techniques for Solving Everyday Problems and Enriching the Life You Know*, a Seth book by Jane Roberts. Seth was a highly respected spiritual teacher, considered by many to have launched the New Age movement in the ’70s. I’d just discovered the book that fall and felt the need to read it while holding a yellow highlighter. The book was based on Seth’s philosophy that we create our own reality through our thoughts and emotions. The material was helping me worry less about the past or the present. I was working on the exercise that suggested I examine my beliefs and identify those I thought were limiting me. I knew I had feared becoming my mother as a parent and had also believed from childhood that I was an unlovable person. I learned that just because I believed something didn’t mean it was true. I was beginning to trust myself and trust the world more. I practiced expecting things to turn out the way I wanted them to be.

I closed the book at midnight and dialed the hotel switchboard for a 6:30 a.m. wake-up call. I felt a nanosecond surge of panic as I wondered what Harry was doing. But I didn’t want to think about
the worst that could happen. I reminded myself that Harry was smart, aware, and in the bubble. Then I remembered the note Bebe had given him. I told myself he was with her. I imagined them dancing under a disco ball. Or maybe they were exchanging hair and makeup tips.

I woke to the sound of Harry unlocking our hotel room door. I checked my phone. It was five-thirty in the morning. He would get only two hours of sleep, but he was safe, just as I had assured myself he would be. I closed my eyes.

Back home, I was glad I’d planned our Las Vegas trip before the start of second semester. Harry ended up spending his spring break in New York visiting friends at New York University, one of the schools where he’d been accepted. While he was gone, I flew to Colorado to ski with friends and met Jeff, an expert skier and business consultant from Denver. Our chairlift rides and discussions about beliefs shaping reality led to a couple of dinners where the exchange of ideas continued. He reminded me of Chris Agyris’s ladder of inference in Peter M. Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, which explained how we jump to conclusions based on our beliefs. Jeff recommended a research piece on measurable psychological capacities from one of his trade publications. I had to buy the article in order to download it when I got home. Then I applied the paper’s thinking about the qualities of effective leaders to my feng shui business that was morphing into a personal leadership development practice. And I recognized that the positive characteristics researcher Fred Luthans described as psychological capital—confidence, hope, optimism,
and resilience—were all attributes I’d used to describe Harry. There was no doubt my son was born the strong, determined leader of himself. I’d been resilient as a kid, refusing to be broken by my parents’ ideas on childrearing. But I’d had to learn the other three traits.

At the beginning of April, Harry received an acceptance letter from Wesleyan University in Connecticut and told me that was where he wanted to go.

“But what about NYU film school?” I asked, incredulous he would pass that up.

“I decided I want more of a campus life for undergrad,” he said. “I can go there for graduate school.”

“I’m sorry, Harry, but I’m not sending you anywhere you haven’t visited first. What if you don’t like it there?”

“But we’re in the middle of rehearsals for Beauty and the Beast! Dreesen will never let me off so close to opening night.”

“Listen, Harry, I’m sure she can spare Cogsworth for a couple of days. I’m calling Alice, who lives in Brooklyn now. We can stay with her and take the train up to Wesleyan. We’re doing this.”

I marveled how at every turn Harry remained so confident in his choices and the vision he had for his life. I would have been too afraid at his age to commit to four years somewhere without having experienced it first. But Harry was the kind of person who could decide on a college sight unseen because he just knew it was what he wanted. I felt inspired to take charge of my soon-to-be-solo life, express my own independence, and find new challenges.

I’d never been to Brooklyn. But I felt instantly at home among the tree-lined blocks of brownstones, shops, and restaurants. Alice’s
Boerum Hill neighborhood reminded me of Wrigleyville in Chicago. There was comfort in this borough’s midwestern vibe.

“You know, I didn’t think I could ever live in Manhattan,” I told Alice as we passed a joint in the backyard garden of her townhouse. “But I could really see myself in Brooklyn.”

“Julie!” Alice gasped. “You must move here. I insist. Think of how much fun we’d have!”

“That goes without saying,” I laughed. “I’m going to downsize to a condo after Harry goes to college in the fall, but none of the places I’ve looked at feel right to me. Maybe that’s because I’m supposed to move to Brooklyn.”

The backyard breeze was warm, but I felt cold shivers on my arms and a tingling in my shoulders at the thought of uprooting myself so completely. Before meeting Ken, I’d always pictured myself on one of the coasts. I worked with clients by phone, so location didn’t matter. Harry was certainly a big city kid. I couldn’t imagine him moving back to Milwaukee after college and thought he already had designs on living in New York City.

On our train ride back to Alice’s from Wesleyan, I pictured a Brooklyn brownstone flat with dark wood floors and a balcony, close to Alice and the Brooklyn Academy of Music or Prospect Park. I giggled to myself and felt light-headed. I had just given myself permission to do something daring and different. I could take a risk and it wouldn’t matter what anybody else thought. Then I looked at Harry. I cared what he thought. I tapped him on the arm, and he took out his ear buds.

“Harry,” I said, leaning forward. “I’m thinking of moving to New York after you leave for college.”
“Really?” he asked, his eyes wide.
“Yeah, but I want to make sure it won’t seem like I’m stalking you if I move out here.”
“Mom, I’ll be in Connecticut. It’s not even the same state.”
“But what about after, if you’re in New York?”
“It’s a big city, Mom. It will be fine if you’re here.”
“Are you sure?”
“Yes, I’m excited for you! Plus I want to get summer jobs in New York, so now I can live with you during my internships.”
“Yea!” I said, smiling so hard that my cheeks hurt. That was it. I was going to become a New Yorker.

During Harry’s last weeks of high school, while fantasizing about selling my home in Milwaukee and finding an apartment in Brooklyn, I made lists of everything I had to do to send him off to college. There was a dorm refrigerator to order, meal plans to choose, and health insurance waivers to sign. A few days before graduation, Harry came home with his red cap and gown.

“I think I’m going to wear my red platform stilettos with this outfit,” he said, holding up the full-length red garment in front of himself.

“Harry, you can’t wear heels to your high school graduation!”
“Why not? I wear them with all of my other gowns.”
I shook my head with disapproval. “Please think it over, Harry. Graduation is a serious ceremony.”
“There’s nothing to think about, Mom. I’m wearing them.”
I remembered the night two years earlier when Harry had worn black patent leather pumps with jeans and a military-styled
The Graduation Stilettos

jacket I’d bought on Melrose Place in Los Angeles in the ’80s out on the auditorium stage to introduce the “Trashy Fashion” line he’d put together for the high school’s Talent Showcase. The drama teacher Ms. Dreesen had shared my trepidation about Harry wearing heels out on stage.

“What not?” Harry told me backstage, “Galliano wears them.”

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“He’s the fashion director at Christian Dior, Mom.”

Of course, he knew that, and I didn’t. The kids in the audience that night had cheered and whooped for Harry the moment he walked out from behind the curtain.

On the night of graduation, Harry and I met Ken and my Aunt Margie at Carini’s Italian restaurant near the high school. Harry was wearing a white tuxedo shirt, black-and-white glen plaid pants, a red tie, and his black Converse sneakers. I could only hope that he’d changed his mind about the red stilettos. It just didn’t seem right for a commencement ceremony. After parking in the Shorewood High lot, Harry grabbed his Chrome messenger bag and ran into the auditorium to change. When he came back outside dressed in his red satin gown and mortarboard, he was still in sneakers. I took pictures of him and his friends, and Aunt Margie took a shot of Harry with Ken and me. It had been drizzling earlier, and the light was perfect for photos of beaming teenagers all in red.

Ken and I took our seats in the auditorium. When Harry’s name was called, Ken lifted his camera, and we watched our son sashay in high heels across the auditorium like it was a runway during Fashion Week. The front rows filled with students clapped,
The Graduation Stilettos

hooted, and pounded their feet as Harry accepted his diploma. He turned to wave as he walked off, and by then applause had ignited across the room and up into the balcony.

I was misty eyed and my hands stung from clapping. Ken’s eyes were wet, too, and we exchanged the jubilant look of proud parents.

“A mind of his own,” Ken whispered in my ear.

“That’s for damn sure,” I said.

Ken was referring to the birth announcement he’d designed for Harry. Under date, time, weight, and height, Ken had added the line of copy, “Already has a mind of his own.” Truer words about a personality had never been predicted. Harry was unabashedly Harry.
Christmas dinner in Milwaukee, 2011